

## Transnational marriage in Yiwu, China: trade, settlement and mobility

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# **Transnational marriage in Yiwu: trade, settlement and mobility**

**Key Words:** trade, transnational marriage, migration, settlement, and anchoring

## **Abstract**

This paper explores intermarriage between Chinese women and foreign Muslim traders in Yiwu, China through a consideration of women's experience of uncertainty in settlement and decisions regarding migration. In so doing, it argues that intermarriage plays an important role in anchoring trading networks for the traders. However, this anchor is not firm, as such households also face significant uncertainties due to the structural constraints resulting from the unstable nature of informal trade; state migration policies, both internal and border control; and challenges from children's education. Furthermore, migration decision-making processes are equally impacted by personal dimensions of attachment, marriage (in)stability, family orientations and perceived cultural gaps. Women are active agents in negotiating and adapting to new situations but their agency is limited by structural constraints.

## **Introduction**

This paper challenges the taken-for-granted role of transnational marriage/intimacy in trading networks that cross international borders. In particular, it responds to the recent work of anthropologists Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado (2015) who note that intimate relationships between Afghan men and "local women" play a vital role in the spatial anchoring and commercial fortunes of transnational Afghan traders in Ukraine. While not denying a key role for transnational marriage in trading networks and also being fully aware of different contexts, I raise questions about the degree to which marriage is necessarily an anchor point in trading networks if settlement itself is unstable. Based on the data collected through twenty-six cases of Chinese women who married foreign Muslim traders in the Chinese international trading node of Yiwu, I demonstrate how a widespread sense of uncertainty concerning settlement

leads some households to migrate and re-anchor their footholds outside China – either in the husband’s country or in a third country. For this reason, the ‘spatial anchoring’ accomplished through marriage in transnational trading networks should not be taken for granted. Then the questions will be: what factors contribute to women’s sense of uncertainty in settlement? What elements shape decisions over settlement and migration in their marriages, and with what material and wellbeing outcomes?

Transnational marriages in Yiwu are relatively new. In the last three decades, Yiwu, a once small town on the east coast Zhejiang Province has grown to become the world’s largest wholesale market for small commodities, attracting hundreds of thousands of traders from all over the world each year. Most traders are Muslims from African, Arabian and south Asian countries<sup>1</sup>. They started coming to Yiwu in the late 1980s, but a population boom has occurred since 2000 alongside the trading boom. Meanwhile, the trading opportunities also attract thousands of internal Chinese labour migrants, including large numbers of women who come to work in markets, trade agencies, restaurants, hotels, shops or as independent traders<sup>2</sup>. The encounters of people, goods and cultures creates new patterns of “intercultural intimacy” (Farrer 2008; Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015) and striking forms of transnational families.

There are no reliable sources of information regarding the number of households formed on the marriages between Chinese women and foreign men in Yiwu. In accord with the Chinese household registration (*hukou*) system, a marriage and the subsequent new household should be registered in the place where the Chinese partner’s *hukou* is registered<sup>3</sup>. Because the

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<sup>1</sup> According to official statistics, the registered foreign population is 14,000, most of whom are Arabs (Marsden 2018:136).

<sup>2</sup> According to official data, Yiwu has a registered population of 759,902 and internal migrants numbered 1,331,700 in 2013 (Li, Wang et al. 2016), but no specific data available on female migrants.

<sup>3</sup> China’s *hukou* system was introduced in 1958 as a modern means of population registration. It is a legal document that records the household population’s basic information, including the name of the natural person, date of birth, relatives, and marital status. It was designed to control rural-to-urban migration. After

majority of Chinese women in Yiwu are migrants from other parts of China, Yiwu offices have no records. According to my informants, there are currently around 300 – 400 mixed marriages between Chinese women and foreign Muslim husbands in Yiwu<sup>4</sup>. Due to its relatively relaxed policy particularly in terms of religion, Yiwu indeed has become a popular destination not just among foreign Muslim traders but also Chinese Muslim migrants. As a result, it has come to be known as “home to sizeable and diverse Muslim communities”, where “a distinctively ‘Islamic’ flavour of life” (Marsden, 2018:124) is visible in parts of the city where Muslims live and socialize. In addition to the large Mosque, a symbol of Islam’s place in public life, within which Muslims from different cultural backgrounds have major gatherings especially for Friday prayers and Islamic festivals, the Muslim food street ‘Meada’ (yiguo fenqing jie, meaning foreign street), is also well-known in China and also among traders all over the world for its diverse Halal restaurants.

Although a lot has been written on foreign traders in Yiwu (Guo 2007; Ge 2011; Ma 2012; Jia 2017) their marriages and relation to Chinese are under researched. The first goal of the paper thus is to fill this gap in the literature. Furthermore, it contributes to transnational marriage studies in China particularly in the trading context. Earlier studies have focused on women’s marriage to (and migration with) husbands from Western countries or developed Asian countries. With the trading boom between China and the outside world, an emerging body of scholarship has started documenting transnational marriages in China – albeit mainly

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reform in 1980s, China allows for free mobility of population, however, one is still not entitled to social benefits in migrant destination unless able to change *hukou*. Nowadays it is possible to switch one’s *hukou* from one place to another, but it is extremely difficult, particularly from rural to urban and from smaller towns and cities to bigger ones due to the strict control criteria that have been set up by each place.

By the time I was in Yiwu, the condition of moving one’s *hukou* included: an above college degree (*dazhuan*) or having certain skills demanded by the city; or purchasing a flat in Yiwu; or having paid at least five years’ social insurance. Few of my informants meet these criteria hence still keep their *hukou* at their hometown.

<sup>4</sup> According to Ma Yan, about 30 couples undertook the Muslim marriage ceremony, Nikah, at the local mosque each year from 2001-2011. Actual marriages are likely to have been higher; since 2004, the city government has required couples to show a registered Chinese marriage certificate before the Nikah can be conducted, leading many to find a way to do Nikah in other places (Ma, 2012: 305-306).

on marriages between Chinese women and African traders in Guangzhou. This body of work has shed light on the marginalized positions of transnational couples and the precarities of their marriages in legal and institutional terms (Lan 2015; Zhou 2017). In this paper, I stress a number of other dimensions in family life that are also important factors in perceptions of uncertainties and decision-making regarding mobility. These factors include economic and material ones (e.g. the unstable nature of informal trade, domestic and global economic circumstances, access to property and other economic resources); but also personal dimensions of attachment and marriage stability; family values and cultural norms and practices; and the prospects for children's education.

By focusing on the experience of the Chinese wives, this paper also contributes to transnational marriage studies in general. Transnational marriage is often associated with migration. "Men and women are migrating to marry or marrying in order to migrate, with greater or lesser degrees of agency and in the context of varied structural constraints and opportunities." (Brettell 2017:82). Recent works (Piper and Roces 2003; Burgess 2004; Constable 2005; Freeman 2005; Lauser 2006; Faier 2007; Wang 2007; Bloch 2011; Cole 2014) have challenged such "dichotomous thinking" that presupposes strong differences between "love/instrumentalism, autonomy/dependence, dominance/subordination, home/host country" (Brettell 2017:91). They focused on migrants' agency and portrays a more complex picture of their lived experience in marital families and receiving countries (see also Kim 2010:722-25). Other scholars, such as in Ishii's (2016) edited volume have also shown a complex and diverse migratory trajectory rather than a simple "south to north" migration pattern as prevalent in the literature (e.g Wang and Chang 2002; Constable 2005; Oxfeld 2005; Thai 2008; Fleischer 2008; Kim 2010; Kringelbach 2015) or "north to south" as concerned by some others (Farrer 2007; Walsh 2009). The experience of those who married migrants is relatively under-researched (Kudo 2007:4). This paper thus aims to contribute to a

recently emerging body of literature that sheds light on the experience of spouses from host countries (Kudo 2007; Cheng, Yeoh et al. 2015; Lan 2015).

### **Theoretical framework: (social) anchoring**

The theoretical framework of (social) anchoring was proposed by Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazłowska based on her work with Polish migrants to the UK. It refers to ‘the processes of finding significant footholds which enable migrants to acquire socio-psychological stability and security and function effectively in new life settings’ (2016). In other words, these are ‘settlement’ mechanisms that highlight stability and security in psychological, emotional and structural terms (2018b: 252; 2018a: 632-634; 2016: 1129). The reverse processes of ‘unanchoring’ are similar (2018b: 252).

Grzymala-Kazłowska highlights three major tangible anchors (2016: 1131). First, the availability of legal and institutional (e.g. personal documents, legal status, and access to formal institutions) anchors facilitate settlement; their absence or disappearance can motivate unanchoring. In Yiwu, migrants who marry Chinese nationals with no local *hukou* gain few tangible anchors through marriage, while their partners – especially with the coming of children – experience an intensified absence of anchors as well. Internal and international legislation and policies render the settlement of both individuals, let alone the couple and family, unstable. The foreign partner faces contingency in visa applications; both are excluded from the local social welfare system including housing, medicine, and schooling due to hukou systems in China. Second, economic (economic resources, consumed goods, types of economic activity) anchors are essential. In Yiwu, the informal trade with which many husbands are engaged carries high risks and creates substantial economic uncertainty within the household. In addition, house ownership, social and economic relations are highly relevant factors for (un)anchoring. Third, in response to Grzymala-Kazłowska’s spatial and

environmental (such as place of birth, place of residence) anchor, here in Yiwu, the couple are both migrants. Facing the uncertainty in settlement, they have to consider whether to anchor their roots in China, move to the husband's country, or to a third country.

Grzymala-Kazlowska also stresses that social anchors are embedded in social relations (contemporary but also historical) (2016: 1131). She mainly refers to the role of social networks in facilitating adaptation and integration of migrants in new settling. Here, I refer to the relationship within the couple because (in)stability in this relationship is key for negotiating whether to move or not. It is important to stress that decisions to settle or migrate taken within transnational marriages are different from those undertaken by individual migrants precisely because the household is not a solid unit. The relationship between the two members of the couple are affected by various dynamics including emotional attachments, economic interests, cultural gaps, personal characteristics and social networks. In Yiwu, emotional attachment and (in)stability within a marital relationship are considered by women as crucial elements in their decisions about whether or not to "follow" their husbands.

Grzymala-Kazlowska notes that the different types of mixed anchors include cultural ones (related to language, cultural transfers, norms and values) interiorised by individuals (2016: 1131) and the value of family and community (2018a: 637). Similarly, perceived cultural gaps and differences in the social environment of their husband's home country were extremely important to women. The majority of women worried about cultural gaps and their adaptation in their husband's country, and thus either preferred the possibility of moving to a third country or trying their best to anchor their roots in China.

In addition to highlighting the multidimensionality, the concept of (social) anchoring also emphasises the processual character of establishing footholds (2016: 1133) and agents who seek security and stability (2018a: 634). Despite the structural constraints that significantly

shape the instability of settlement, the Chinese women in these marriages still hold certain degrees of agency in terms of considering various factors, making decisions of whether or not move and where to anchor. In this sense, the concept of anchoring also could capture the interactions of structure and agency in migration studies.

## **Method and Sample**

The presented data here is based on cases of twenty-six women who married foreign Muslim traders. The original data also included one couple formed by a Chinese woman who married a trader from New Zealand, and data from ten foreign Muslim traders who married Chinese women. Three of these men were husbands to women who are still included. However, I have excluded consideration of their cases, along with those of other men. As the New Zealand trader is not a Muslim, I have also omitted consideration of his wife.

The research was conducted over a span of six months during 2016-17. I combined multi-dimensional methodology, including in depth semi-structured interviews, conversations and unconstructed interviews, participating in family or friends' events and chat through internet. The informant pool was built up through snowballing, and I mostly invited new informants for coffee, lunch or dinner to begin interviews. I also participated in some family activities (e.g. BBQ party, children's birthday party) and women's friends - gatherings during the festivals or weekends. I had the chance to talk to some family members too. Half of the women I met more than once. I also added women's Wechat (social media), so I followed their updates on daily basis and sometimes exchanged messages. I also joined in one women's Wechat group constituted by 23 women who had married foreign traders in Yiwu. I learned a lot through following their conversations in the group.

As for the background of the twenty-six female informants, they are mostly migrants:

Zhejiang Province (but not Yiwu) (5), Xinjiang (5), Henan (4), Beijing (2), Yunnan (2),



Fujian (1), Gansu (1), Ningxia (1), Shan'xi /山西(1) Shan'xi/陕西 (1), Liaoning (1), Shandong (1), Anhui (1). Just over half are Han Chinese (15) who have converted to Islam, while the other 11 are Chinese Muslims from other ethnic groups, including Hui (6), Uyghur (3), Kazakh (1) and Tajik (1). Most of them are in their 30s (19), three are above forty, three are under thirty and one above fifty. Three of them had already divorced their foreign husband, one was already widowed, and the rest are in legally registered marriages. The marriage duration varies: nine married between ten to fifteen years (including two before divorcing and one before losing husband), ten married between five to ten years, and seven of them married within five years (including one divorce). Among them, fourteen work with their husbands in the same import-export company or restaurant, including three of them who combine this work with online business. Three are housewives; four mainly engage in *weishang*—a popular online business-model in China in which goods are sold through WeChat – a popular social media platform, and occasionally help the husband's business; and the remaining five have other jobs outside the home. Despite the diversity, it is clear that more than half have no income except what comes from the family business – a point that underscores their financial dependence on trading performance.

The twenty-six husbands are all Muslim, but national and regional identities vary: Jordan (6), Egypt (5), Pakistan (4), Iraq (3), Yemen (2), Sub-Saharan- Africa (2), India (2), Iran (1), and Afghanistan (1). All but three work in the informal business sector. Of the exceptional three, one of the Egyptian husbands works as an English teacher, a second is a student, and one of the Pakistani husbands is a barber. Their arrival in China varies from six years to eighteen years. The majority speak relatively fine Chinese thus they mainly communicate with their wives in Chinese although they sometimes mix in English. Two wives are fluent in Arabic. These details underscore the point that the sense of instability within the family has little to do with the constraints of day-to-day life: the husbands are not new arrivals struggling to find

footholds for survival or even a sense of well-being, and the spouses can communicate effectively.

Thus it is clear that the problems concern the settlement of families. Only four of the women under study do not have children. Thirteen have one child, eight have two children and one has three children. Because children officially go to school at the age of six in China, households face exceptional pressure as their children approach school-age. During the time of my fieldwork, fifteen households had children under six and were facing the encroaching need to choose a school. Currently the young children mostly attend Chinese kindergartens (private or district level) except two in international kindergarten and one in an Arabic one. Among the nine households<sup>5</sup> that have children of school age, three send their children to an Arabic school, three send their children to Chinese school, and one household sends one child to Chinese school and the other one to Arabic school because of difficulty/failing in accessing to Chinese schools. Two households have children abroad: one leaves three children in Jordan after divorce; the other woman sent one child to husband's country (India) to inherit land and sent the other one in Chinese school after husband's death.

### **Uncertainties in settlement: business, migration law and children's education**

Marriage to Chinese women does offer migrant husbands a relatively stable base and various other advantages including their wives' assistance in language and business activities, as well as access to wives' social resources and networks (Kudo 2007; Lan 2015; Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015). Such unions indeed play a significant role in the 'spatial anchoring and commercial fortunes' (Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015: 145) of foreign traders in China . Though the duration of these marriages would suggest that the majority of transnational couples can successfully settle, pursue business and raise families in Yiwu, my informants do

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<sup>5</sup> Two overlap with above fifteen households as they have one child under six and the other above six.

not take such a course for granted. The wives, at least, remain uncertain about settlement.

Some worry that their foreign husbands will attempt to return to their roots; they know about other wives who faced this situation, and of many who followed their husbands to take care of extended family members in foreign countries. Even at the outset of marriage, such eventualities were considered and many of the wives report that they agreed with their husbands that as long as their own parents were alive, they would not leave China.

Sometimes, however, reality can frustrate such plans.

Among the twenty-six wives, fourteen are certainly concerned about settlement and emigration, eight definitely not, and another four somewhat concerned. If we have a close look at the first fourteen cases, five of them worry about their husbands' intention to return to their roots in future, the other nine are under urgent pressure to move. Regarding destination, four are planning for a third country, but the other ten are sure that emigration would be to their husband's country. The eight who are not at all concerned include the four women who are no longer married (3 divorcees and 1 widow). But when they did have husbands, they too had faced questions of settlement: two had moved to the husband's country and one had lived with her husband in a third country (Dubai).

Beyond these numbers, concern with migration is linked to a complex combination of various elements. The most notable ones include the viability of informal trade and business, migration law and migrant status, children's education, personal attachment and stability of relationship, family orientations and cultural aspects. In this section, I will highlight the first three elements which are crucial for creating uncertainty in settlement and determine when the household might migrate.

#### Business, risk and uncertainty in settlement

The contingency in informal trade has a direct impact on the instability of settlement and decision for migration. Among fourteen cases who are concerned about mobility, seven cited trade and income instability as a major triggering factor. Two of the four somewhat concerned cases also highlighted that mobility will depend on future trade and income. The three no longer married women who had migrated with their husbands also explained their decisions as due to economic reasons. If we have a close look at those who are less concerned about migration, we see a converse situation: three of these foreign husbands do not engage in trade (the teacher, barber and student) and two have financial support from wives' affluent native families.

How is it that trade matters so much to the (in)stability of settlement and to migration decisions? As mentioned earlier, 65% of the informants' households rely on the family business, this means that their major income comes from trade. However, many households complained that "business is getting difficult to do" in recent years. It has become much more competitive, but also less profitable and very difficult to attract new clients. Here it should be clarified that these households most often work within the middle-ground between Chinese suppliers and foreign clients. They are generally caught, then, in a variety of relations of credit and debt on two ends. Even when these work out over a span of months and years, they can face short-term crises in financing which bring enormous pressure onto the household budget. Further, law does not protect the middlemen. In Yiwu, it is customary for foreign clients to pay 30% at the time of order and the remaining 70% when they receive the goods (within three months' time). If the clients fail to pay the balance in full, the import-export agency are expected to pay the suppliers. Thus as import-export agents, my informants and their husbands are often under high risk to pay the suppliers on the behalf of non-paying clients, and their households come to bear debt due to delay or failure in clients' payment.

When the couple are in significant debts and find it difficult to raise their family in China due to the high living costs, they consider moving to the husbands' country or to a third country.

Kaylee, a 30-year-old woman, came from a small village in Henan Province in northern China. She married a Jordanian husband eight years before our meeting and started worked for her husband's import-export company shortly before their marriage. They have been maintaining good relations with some established Jordanian clients, however, when these clients failed to sell all the goods they had purchased on credit from Kaylee and her husband, and were unable to pay their debt, Kaylee and her husband came under pressure as they still had to pay their suppliers. As a result, they fell into considerable debt. During my early meetings with Kaylee, she often expressed worry that someday they might move to her husband's country, as others had, if business continued to decline. This became reality when I returned to Yiwu after travelling in China in October 2017. Kaylee had decided to move to Jordan the following year. Her husband had already moved most of his business to Jordan and was soon to leave permanently. She and her daughter would join him after Spring Festival.

It is also the case when households are in significant debts, they may 'escape' to the husband's country. Sofia is a Hui woman from Beijing who ran an import-export agency with her husband. One year before I met her, she had experienced the "worst luck ever" when clients disappeared without paying for goods, which put them into serious debt. Lacking the financial capability to pay suppliers and concerned for the security of children – being afraid that suppliers might kidnap them to force payment, she agreed to her husband's suggestion to move to his home country, Jordan. Due, she said, to various problems in their relationship and life, Sofia decided to return to China – considering divorce also aiming to pay back their debt little by little. Soon after she left, however, her husband married a second wife. Feeling deeply hurt, Sophia filed for divorce, but her three children were still in Jordan. She is hoping

to take her children back to China one day after she clear off all the debts – now she is under great pressure to return the debts with constant press of suppliers in China.

Lina is another woman who is concerned about settlement. In 2015, she married a man originally from Palestine who grew up mainly in Saudi Arabia and held a Jordanian passport. After marriage, Lina decided to follow her husband wherever he decided to go. Since her husband has needed to take care of the family business after his father's death in 2014, he often moves between Saudi Arabia and China. Lina goes with him, but now minds feeling that she is never really settled. The instability in settlement has affected other aspects of her life. Since marriage, she has stayed at home, helping with her husband's business when needed, and only having pocket money given by her husband as personal income. Lina wants to start her own small business, partly to increase her income, but more importantly, to give her something interesting to do. But – how can she do this when she has no idea how long they might stay in China or Saudi Arabia, or maybe somewhere else? “Totally uncertain”, she often says. She also wants to buy a house in a newly developed area of Yiwu, however, she is not sure that this is a good idea when it is not clear where they will settle in the future.

Engagement with relatively small family business places continual pressures on the household. When business profit continuously declines, or when the couple fall into significant debt, permanent migration is considered more seriously. Then, other factors come into further consideration.

### Immigration law

“National borders lie at the heart of migrant precarity” (Paret and Gleeson 2016:289). Research on transnational/binational marriages, particularly involving south-to-north migration patterns, have shown the impacts of restrictive migration policy on family strategies and individual wellbeing. They pointed out complex intersections of gender, class,

race, and legal status that are associated with challenges, vulnerability and individual negotiation of external borders based on a legal framework of citizenship and rights (Schans 2012; Fernandez 2013; Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Cole 2014; Sikic-Micanovic, Radacic et al. 2018).

In Yiwu, migration policy, as implemented through visa control, directly affects the families established by foreign traders in China. Most foreign traders who have married Chinese women hold a family union visa. This is considered a relatively easy and inexpensive visa to acquire, which is why it is preferred to business visa which is more expensive and involve more cumbersome forms of documentation,<sup>6</sup> but it brings other problems. A family union visa allows its holder to remain in China for a maximum of one year before renewal.

However, it is illegal to do business using a family visa (Zhou, 2018: 132). Even worse, from the perspective of those who hold it, its renewal is uncertain. My informants claim that renewal depends to a significant degree on the mood of the visa officer on the day of application. Thus, immigrants living under a family visa and conducting business also live in fear of being caught. If their business also makes little or lower profit, they are less likely to stay in China considering the rising living cost. Regardless of the initial visa acquired by foreign spouses, they are locked into a cycle of uncertain renewals because they never become eligible for Chinese citizenship. Many households have become increasingly disturbed by the visa application and renewal process with what appears to be a trend towards increasing restriction in visa allocation. Since the G20 Summit in Hangzhou in 2016, the Yiwu government also became stricter about issuing visas to foreigners (Marsden 2018:126). Since that time, the application for a family visa extension has to be submitted in the wife's hometown, and in person, requiring families to also undertake the costs and logistics of traveling between Yiwu and the wife's hometown. Moreover, some local authorities – like

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<sup>6</sup> While family visa is 800 RMB per year, the business visa will cost around 3200 RMB per month.

individual officers - are more nervous than others about regulating foreign populations, and may be reluctant to grant or renew a visa unless great efforts are made and “*guanxi*” (social networks) are called into play. In some circumstances, even “*guanxi*” may not work well. Thus, whether a visa is extended is felt to lie beyond the control of a Chinese wife. The couple are forced to deal together with such contingent situations.

### Challenges in Children’s education

Kudo (2017) and Talesjota (2010) documented migration by Japanese women to their Pakistani husbands’ country or a third (usually Islamic) country due to the needs to educate children in an Islamic environment. Yet, in the case of Yiwu, it is institutional barriers that create challenges for children’s education and further contribute to Chinese women’s sense of uncertainty in settlement as I will explain in this section. Lan (2015:146) observed two major constraints in transnational households between Chinese women and African traders in Guangzhou: the One Child Policy and the *hukou* system. In Yiwu, however, the One Child Policy does not appear to be a major factor. According to my informants, some indeed had paid exorbitant fines to the government when they gave birth to a second child. Some delivered a baby in other places like Hong Kong or the husband’s country. Some simply ignored the policy, and those who have had children more recently have benefitted from the loosening of the policy. Since 2016, all children have been registered free of charge. However, the *hukou* system continues to pose a real problem for children’s education. Children inherit their parents’ *hukou*, which means that those of my informants are registered in their mothers’ hometowns (see also Lan 2015). Accordingly, they are officially unable to enter public schools in Yiwu. Some women managed to send their older children to public school through *guanxi*, but this is becoming more difficult. Some women are considering transferring their *hukou* to Yiwu, but this is not easy due to the various requirements.



Among the nine households cited above who are under great pressure to move to the husband's' country or a third country, the eight with children also cited education as another important triggering factor due to the age that their children soon will enter school. For Kaylee, it is the time pressure for her daughter's education that precipitated the final decision to move. Their daughter is five years old and will soon enter primary school. Kaylee had tried to move her daughter's *hukou* from Henan to Yiwu but had failed. With Arabic and other international schools beyond their budget, Kaylee had made the difficult decision to leave China.

Arabic schools are an option for some families. Four of the seven households have school-aged children in Arabic school. Arabic school is not the preferred choice as it is expensive. Normally primary schools cost RMB7500-10,000<sup>7</sup> per semester. And, they are often considered as being of poor quality with untrained teachers. Furthermore, students from these schools could not take Chinese university entrance exams.

International schools in Yiwu could be another alternative. The advantage of international schools is that they put more weight on teaching English. However, they are too expensive for most transnational families, particularly those with two or more children. Moreover, these are just part of the cost of education. As conceptions of raising children in China have shifted from "growing up naturally" to "deliberate cultivation and training" (Liu 2016), it has become common to send children to "hobby courses" such as dancing, painting, or musical instruments; and tutoring courses in subjects such as English, reading, writing, mathematics etc.), which cost even more: at least RMB5000 each per year. Facing such a high cost of education, many transnational families complain that it is difficult to raise children in China.

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<sup>7</sup> It equals to 950 -1265 EUR. The income of trading families varies based on how many clients they have and how big each deal is. It is also highly uncertain due to changes in domestic and global markets. Even worse, clients' arrearage is a big issue for many families, and it is common that clients only pay certain amounts and still keep ordering, so it is hard to count exactly how much income they have each month. But the average monthly income is around RMB 125,00-16666 which is 1580-2100 EUR according to deal but whether or not they could have these amounts of money at hand is another thing.

Facing these difficulties, some transnational families do send their children back to the mother's Chinese family, often in the countryside. This situation is also not desirable, as the mothers know that they must endure not only the long-term separation from their **parents**, but that they will face a range of social problems specific to the legions of "left behind" children across China. Keeping their children in Yiwu and somehow sending them to Chinese school is therefore the preferred solution. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction is also widespread among the women who have succeeded in this endeavour. They complain of the "bad school environment" in Chinese schools, which may include material competition among students, parents bribing teachers to get better "care", too much homework and not enough critical thinking. Such criticisms are a perennial topic of conversation among women married to foreigners.

In one woman's party during the Eid festival in June 2017, for example, women complained to one another that competition in Chinese schools was unbearable. One lady complained that if you did not give gifts to teachers they would treat your children differently. At her sister's son's school, teachers even asked students to fill in a form regarding which types of transport they use to come to school. One student's grandfather brought him by trishaw. After filling in that form, the child told his grandfather not to pick him up anymore because it was embarrassing to him. Other women commented that it was ridiculous, and "totally wealth comparison" (*chiluoluo de bifu xinli*). They added various examples from their own experience or stories they had heard. Haiyan said that a couple of days previously her son came to her and said "Mom, please buy a lipstick for my teacher." She asked why? Her son said that his teacher's birthday was coming. One of his classmates had given her nail polish and the teacher was very happy. He also wanted to make his teacher happy. Haiyan was upset that children of her son's age had already learned this. To her, it should be shameful for teachers to take gifts from parents. Ultimately, the women attributed all these issues to the

Chinese culture of *guanxi* which is inescapable in the country. Moreover, the Chinese school system was perceived as emphasizing rote learning and test scores, but not life skills, thus failing to prepare children for real life. But they were more upset about “too much homework”, not just for children but for parents as well. For instance, kindergartens asked children to make a poster at an age when they could write few words, forcing parents to make it.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, children’s education was a significant issue contributing to the precarity experienced by transnational families in Yiwu. Although these transnational families might try to cope with the contingency with trade and visa regulation, children’s education is a decisive factor in terms of when they need to leave China. From Chinese women’s perspective, “learning Chinese is to keep the root in China.” However, since few had *hukou* registration in Yiwu, they felt the system was unequal, making it a constant source of stress for parents. Moreover, living in China, these women were highly aware of their social environment in which education is recognized as the only path for changing one’s fate (Obendiek 2016) and is the legitimate basis for upward social mobility (Hsu 2007; Kipnis 2007) – whether in rural or urban areas. These women want to offer a better education for their children but facing various challenges and institutional barriers they find the effort extremely stressful.

### **Negotiating Mobility: emotional, relational and cultural dynamics**

#### Emotional attachment and (in)stability of married relationship

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<sup>8</sup> Such criticisms are widespread among Chinese parents and children, educators, scholars and media all over China, e.g. Lin, J. and Q. Chen (1995). "Academic Pressure and Impact on Students' Development in China." *McGill Journal of Education* 30(002): 149-168.

, Zhao, X., R. L. Selman, et al. (2015). "Academic Stress in Chinese Schools and a Proposed Preventive Intervention Program." *Cogent Education* 2(1000477): 1-14.

, Xie, A. and G. A. Postiglione (2016). "Guanxi and School Success: an Ethnographic Inquiry of Parental Involvement in Rural China." *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

Emotional attachment and marriage (in)stability are also important for deciding whether to leave or stay. Among fourteen women who were concerned about future migration, eleven of them cited close emotional attachment with their husbands. Conversely, the four women (out of eight) who still have husbands but are not considering migration, say their relationships are unstable and they are not closely attached to their husbands. Among the four who have ambiguous attitudes, two have little confidence in the future of their relationship although they report attachment to their husbands. As many scholars have pointed out, intimacy, love, affect and partnership play key roles in migration decision-making and behaviour (Constable 2003; Faier 2007; Mai and King 2009; Walsh 2009; Bloch 2011; Brettell 2017: 89). Women in Yiwu also put emotional and relational aspects at the centre of their consideration when it comes to migrate or not.

Parida and her Pakistani husband have a three-year-old son. She sees little hope in switching her *hukou* to Yiwu. This means that it is highly likely that her son could not go to Chinese public school. She is also one of the women who certainly want to have more than one child. Considering the high cost of raising children in China, she and her husband are planning to move to Pakistan in a few years' time. For her, it does not matter where they live as long as the couple are together. She told me how crazily they were in love before marriage. After marriage, her husband still keeps their passion alive, surprising her from time-to-time with special gifts, particularly on her birthday, Women's Day or wedding anniversary. In her view, these indicate how much her husband cares about her; she is not, she says, a 'materialistic woman'. She values their relationship too and claims that she would never mind following her husband to another country.

Parida is not the only woman who considers emotional attachment and harmonious relationship as important reason to move. I came across several women who had no hesitation in explaining their willingness to move in the future. They invoked phrases such as: "because

he is my husband; he is the father of my children” or “because I chose him, and I can’t let him go alone someday”. Some of the women told me how considerate their husbands are. For instance, one woman who married a man from Yemen told me that her husband is very considerate. Sometimes when she came home very tired after work, her husband would not allow her to cook, instead calling out for *waimai* (take-away). Sometimes if children are too noisy, he would tell them to be quiet, saying ‘your mother needs rest’. In contrast, those who have less attachment and are in an unstable relationship do not consider migration. They told me opposite stories – about the lack of understanding, care and concerns from their husbands.

The marital relationship of a transnational couple is complicated by the presence of different cultural and religious (norms, ideas, practices) in a range of domains: the economic (business interests, business activities -way of managing etc), relational (emotional attachments, gendered power relations, dealing with extended families), and even personal (characteristics, temper, mind-sets and habits). These differences permeate the everyday interactions of couples from small things to serious issues. In her Ph.D. work, Zhou Yang highlights conflicts between the Chinese- African couples due to religious difference, noting that Chinese women who have converted to Islam often lack understanding of their husband’s religion and are reluctant to practice certain aspects of it (2017: 125-130). In Yiwu, some women’s experience can be explained in this way. But, it is important to note that converting to Islam is complex, and women who convert have diverse experiences and manifest various degrees of faith and practice. Within this sample group, there are no truly clear patterns of tension in the marriages that can be described as “religious” in orientation.

Clear patterns of conflict emerged rather around different views of raising children, and particularly the gendered dimensions of childcare (see also Zhou 2017: 130-134). For instance, one woman told me that her Iraqi husband does not like her reading or learning new skills, but expected her to behave ‘like an Arabic woman’ - just cook, clean, take care of

children and watch TV. This made her upset. She complained that long-term tensions with her husband had caused her serious illness and led to a recent operation. Another woman also complained that her husband never offered to help as he thinks raising children is mainly the job of women. These were interpreted by the Chinese wives as evidence of cultural difference, but it seems most important that these points of conflict were the ones that were noticed.

In my view, there were many points of difference manifest between husbands and wives. Importantly, they were not just life partners, but in most cases business partners. For this reason, I noted that the members of couples also differed in everyday practices of dealing with business and clients, income distribution, budgeting and future plans. These different orientations towards economic interests (as well as closely connected social relations) seemed able to breed (mis)trust within the couple<sup>9</sup>.

Knowledge of cultural difference also makes women cautious about migration. A few women fear that their husbands might marry second wives if they return to his home country, and indeed the two of three divorces were precipitated by the introduction of a second wife.

However, all relationships are in a negotiating process. Even with poor marital relations, women might still decide to migrate for the sake of their children's education. Other women report "fighting a lot" but also having strong emotional attachment to their husbands. They want to try to work out their relations, and judge migration options according to whether or not it will give them the needed "time" to improve the marriage.

#### Family orientations and Cultural aspects

The solidarity of the nuclear family is another important factor that Chinese women consider when it comes to migration. Friends who Kaylee and I shared suggested that Kaylee should

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<sup>9</sup> For more detailed information, please check my upcoming paper in *Journal of Global Network*, "Transnational marriage in Yiwu- tensions over money".

do online business in China and visit her husband and daughter frequently in Jordan. But Kaylee did not accept their suggestions, giving priority to the union of her nuclear family. Kaylee believes her husband and daughter need her, whilst she has a brother to take care of her parents and she could still visit them once a year just as she did whilst living in Yiwu. As it is for Kaylee, the unity of the nuclear family is important for most women and they also feel relatively little pressure to take care of their own parents. This is not just because the Chinese kinship structure is becoming more nuclear-centred, but also because the continuity of older Chinese family norms means that it is sons who are obliged to take care of ageing parents. Women experience some freedom, then, to negotiate the scope of their care duties. Moreover, my informants have few individual demands for care from their parents; either they are already deceased or cared for by the women's siblings who still live closer to home. One woman has brought her mother to Yiwu.

However, there is one thing that discourages Chinese women to move to husband's country – cultural gap. This is not only based on what they have heard from those women who have migrated to husband's country, but also what they have seen and experienced while they were visiting those countries. They told me the biggest challenge was that, as a woman, they could not move freely in those countries unless their husbands or other family members accompanied them. They also found it difficult to integrate into local society due to the language problem. Even when they tried to participate in female parties with their sisters-in-law, they found it hard to communicate with them and commented to me that they 'had nothing in common'. They said that during female parties, Arabic women prefer Shisha and dancing in which they are not at all interested. In daily life, Arabic women visit each other, tirelessly talking about clothes and jewellery or trying-on each other's dresses, which is very boring for Chinese women who are more concerned about 'earning money'. Although they saw some Chinese women working at Chinese factories or companies after settling there,

most stayed at home feeling bored or engaged in online businesses. Whether women could work outside the house or not largely depended on the attitude of their husbands.

Finally, the conservative religious environment of their husband's country was a concern for some of them. Although some very religious women do not worry too much, those who are relatively relaxed in terms of practicing Islam in China do concern. They were mainly concerned about dressing – covering with hijab, and are not being allowed to wear short or tight clothes. Some worried about potential conflicts with in-laws based on different ideas and practices. For instance, one woman who married a Jordanian trader told me that when their son had been circumcised in Jordan, they were expected to bathe his penis with salted water immediately afterwards. She insisted that this would be too painful; she finally convinced her husband to forego the treatment, but it upset all the relatives. Although she succeeded on this occasion, she did not want to deal with similar conflicts on a regular basis by moving to Jordan. Another woman complained about education. She also married a man of middle-class background from Jordan. She was shocked to discover that his relatives' houses contained no bookshelves – the only book on display was a beautifully decorated Koran hanging on the wall. Even when mothers buy gifts for children, she said, they never gave books. She did not want her children to grow up in such an environment. Therefore, cultural gaps and strict religious practices concerns some Chinese women.

### **Anchoring the roots in China**

Facing the fear of moving to their husbands' country, some transnational couples choose to settle in a third country. This might be the consideration of children's education, or reluctance of living in husband's country, or simply for trading opportunities - working in a third country is a tried and tested tactic of trading communities and networks (Marsden 2018). Malaysia is the preferred destination for many such couples because of its Islamic religion



and geographical proximity to China. However, moving to a third country is not considered to be easy, but, rather, to involve effort, emotional negotiations and to result in new forms of precarity. Thus the majority Chinese women prefer to keep their roots in China and they often actively mobilize all sorts of resources to keep their family rooted in China.

Requiring the husband to buy a house in China is one such strategy. A house provides Chinese women with an important material aspects of security and stability. Among twenty-six women, only six have successfully persuaded their husband to buy a house – all registered under the wife's name. These women are among those who are less concerned about migration. The majority of my informants live in rented housing. This is partly due to the husbands' unwillingness to make an invest in China that they cannot directly control.

Foreigners are not entitled to property ownership in China, thus the house would have to be registered under the wife's name. African traders marrying Chinese women in Guangzhou show the same reluctance (Zhou, 2017:120). However, Chinese women feel insecure about their relationship when their husband does not want to buy a house. In Yiwu, many do not invest in property because they have limited resources and more pressing financial demands, such as paying for their children's education.

Investing in their children's futures is another way that people maintain their roots in China. In the short-term, wives experience the conflicted desires to invest in a flat or in education, but when they prioritize education it is with the intent to stabilize the family's roots in China over the long-term. As one woman told me, she and her friends are aware that they will have to rely on their children in the future, thus if the children live in China, the women themselves will be able to grow old in China. Those who have sent their children to Arabic schools know that the insecurity of their roots will continue. They know their children are unlikely to get prestigious university slots in China, but they still hope that their bilingualism will help them find a job in China.

Chinese women also apply other strategies to keep their roots in China. They may, for instance, attempt to counteract their husbands' "homesickness" and desires to return by being kind to them and creating a "home" atmosphere for them within China. 'After all China is so different from their home country' they often say. They work hard to perform the 'good wife' they imagine of their husband's culture - keeping the house clean and comfortable, cooking nice food and adapting to husband's lifestyle. For instance, many traders in Yiwu socialize in the evening till very late, Chinese women are very tolerant about – neither challenge nor try to change. The woman whose mother lived with her told me that her mother often complained that her husband came home too late. But she defended her husband, saying that it was his culture and that they should respect it. Another woman considered it important to establish and reinforce her husband's authority in the family. She said she knows that most Arab men have a strong sense of masculinity and enjoy authority in the family. Thus she tries to show her respect particularly in front of their children – setting an example for their children to follow. For instance, when her husband was educating their children, she would keep silent even if she disagreed with some of his points. But later, away from her husband, she would reanalyse with her children, the discussion they had had with their father. She said "you must let your husband feel like he is still living in his own country. If he felt uncomfortable here he would always think of returning to his roots. After all, China is such a different country from theirs...."

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that transnational families in Yiwu are experiencing uncertainty in settlement and under pressure to move to the husband's home country or a third country. It draws upon sociologist Grzymala-Kazłowska's concepts of (social) anchoring to analyse major factors that contribute to un-anchoring or uncertainty in the settlement and migration decision-making process. Through all these, the paper not only fills the gaps in marriage

migration studies in Yiwu, in China and in general, but also tries to have dialogue with broader literature concerning the relations between trade, transnational marriage and migration. It argues that the spatial anchoring role of transnational marriage in trading networks should not be taken for granted as settlement itself could be uncertain.

The paper highlighted that the complex intertwining of economic, legal institutional, cultural, emotional, relational and family dimensions of anchoring creates uncertainty and may lead to onward migration in such marriages. First, the contingent character of trade means that couples often experience unavoidable precarity. Since most couple work in the same import-export agency (or nearly equally precarious small businesses, like restaurants), this means a high risk is associated with income generation in these households – if something goes wrong with business, it will directly impact the whole family. In addition to the fact that informal trading activities are always subject to unpredictable global markets and economic policies, and to changing circumstances within the host country, the import-export business in Yiwu has become more competitive and less profitable in recent years. Meanwhile, these households are also at a high risk for being in debt. Between the high risks to securing income and the high living cost in China, returning to the husband's country or moving to a third country can become a preferred option.

Second, legal and institutional constraints create uncertainty in settlement. I highlighted both internal and international migration laws. Firstly, the visa system renders smaller businessmen dependent on family union visas, requiring them to annually confront the contingencies of renewal and the ever-present risks of prosecution for operating a business. Nor does the wife's status as a Chinese citizen provide the family with access to a social safety net. Due to the *hukou* system, the Chinese wives, along with their husbands and children, are largely excluded from accessing the social welfare system in Yiwu.

A third and related factor that contributes to uncertainty in settlement and impacts migration decisions concerns the challenges to children's education. Children are often excluded from public schools on account of the *hukou* system. When other options are considered to be not feasible, moving to another country becomes a solution. While those who have managed to find schools for their children are relatively relaxed about migration, those who have children under school age are the most concerned. Although they are actively looking for solutions, the high cost of raising children in China is a source of financial burden for many households.

While the above three major factors create uncertainty and determine when they migrate, there are other elements that are equally important for migration decision-making. Emotional attachment and marriage (in)stability are key factors. In the cases where Chinese women have strong emotional attachment and relatively stable relationships with their husbands, they tend to follow their husbands' migration, otherwise vice versa. The relevance of a couple's relationship status to migration decisions has been missing from most of marriage migration literatures. I highlight that cultural, economic and personal elements are important for the stability of couples' relationships, which further affect Chinese women's migration decision.

Family orientation is another important factor. On the one hand, Chinese family structure is becoming more nuclear-centred; on the other hand, according to Chinese traditional norm, daughters have less obligation to take care of older parents than do sons. This legitimizes the choice of Chinese women to give priority to the solidarity of their nuclear families.

Finally, a perceived cultural gap is another element determining whether to move or not - here mostly discouraging women's migration to the husbands' country. Chinese women are concerned about their prospects for integrating into local society considering the differences in language, cultural norms and practices. Although some feel they are well prepared by

practicing strictly Islam, those who are relaxed in China seem relatively worried about moving into a more conservative environment.

Overall, the above factors contribute to women's sense of uncertainty in settlement and play a significant role in determining whether to move or not and when. The risks involved in informal trade, and the legal and institutional constraints are beyond the control of individual couples. In this sense, uncertainty in settlement and migration are unavoidable for them. Yet, the decision making process also involves a complex intertwining and negotiation of emotional, relational and cultural dimensions. While some choose a third country due to children's education or business opportunities, the majority of Chinese women still hope to anchor their roots permanently in China. They are active agents in terms of strategically thinking of various solutions, however, their agency has limitations due to structural constraints.

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